

Pompeius and Herennia: a (sad) family tale from Roman Egypt

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The jigsaw of papyri: piecing together the past

Go to Google Earth at 28° 32' 29" N 30° 39' 16" E (some 200 miles south of Cairo) and you will see a large area of wasteland next to the modern town of El-Behnesa. This was the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, one of the grandest in Roman Egypt. Its remains were ransacked centuries ago for building materials. In the earlier twentieth century, digging into the remaining rubbish, British and Italian scholars and local farmers found tens of thousands of documents and literary texts on papyrus, mostly written in Greek and of Roman and Byzantine date.

In this messy process many groups of documents ('archives') became split between modern collections. One of these archives, which I am trying to reconstruct from clues like people and houses mentioned in the texts, is the papers of Lucius Pompeius Niger, a local man who in the Julio-Claudian period served as a legionary and then returned home to Oxyrhynchus. Tattered scraps of the letters, petitions, census and property declarations, and contracts which he had kept give us sneak glimpses of his family's story, often in their own words.

Pompeius: a thoroughly Roman Egyptian

Pompeius' father, Syros, died in A.D. 31. In a written agreement Pompeius and his three brothers (a sister was 'abroad') decided to pay off Syros' debts and have him mummified – the Greek says 'wrapped for funeral' – and to take joint ownership of the unfurnished house. Ethnically the family was probably Egyptian, but they seem to have belonged to the Hellenized elite who were members of the gymnasium, the powerhouse of Greek culture in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire. In the agreement Pompeius is called 'formerly Zoilos but now Pompeius (the) soldier'. Other documents show that around A.D. 18 Zoilos had joined the 22nd Deiotarian legion (not a

crack unit, although it starts in Simon Scarrow's novel *The Legion*), which was stationed just outside Alexandria, and had been given the Roman-style name of Lucius Pompeius Niger. Perhaps there had been a recruiting drive to prepare for an invasion of Parthia by Germanicus, the expected successor of the emperor Tiberius, who visited Alexandria on his way out in A.D. 19 (Pompeius may have seen him) but then died in Syria.

All but one of Pompeius' documents are in Greek, the common language for writing in Roman Egypt, but he probably also spoke Egyptian. He must have learned some Latin in the army, and he adopted other Roman habits. He supplemented his salary by lending out money at interest through a bank, a Roman business practice. He took to filing his own private documents, and pasted together copies of his census and property declarations to form a roll (in effect a file). Pompeius may never have fought on campaign, but he must have helped suppress the deadly riots between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria in A.D. 38.

Life after the army

By A.D. 44 Pompeius had been honourably discharged from the army. In spring A.D. 45 he and his children were given Roman citizenship by the emperor Claudius, as we know from the one Latin text in his archive, a copy of Pompeius' Latin declaration for the universal census of Roman citizens held by Claudius in A.D. 47/8. This is the only example we have from anywhere of a declaration for a Roman citizen census. The textbooks tell you that legions were recruited from Roman citizens, and that if provincials were recruited, they were given Roman citizenship on enlistment. Citizenship on discharge became the reward for provincials recruited into the auxiliary units, and is first attested under Claudius in A.D. 52. But the Roman empire did not always run by the rules written for it by modern scholars. Veterans in theory had various privileges such as freedom from state duties

(liturgies), which local officials constantly tried to ignore. In early September A.D. 63 Pompeius was one of a group of veterans, both legionary and auxiliary, who went to Alexandria to petition the Prefect (governor), at the time Caecina Tuscus, to uphold their rights. According to Pompeius' own record, they chased Tuscus round Alexandria for several days, until the exasperated man promised to write to the local officials, and told them, 'Dismiss, each to his own home, and stop wasting time.' A year later Tuscus himself was dismissed for trying out the baths he had built for a planned visit by Nero.

When he left the army in A.D. 44 Pompeius returned to Oxyrhynchus and lived in his father's house. Some time later his wife Didyme died, and he became friendly with her widowed aunt Charitous. He had some farmland which he managed. One day in April A.D. 59, coming back to town on his donkey, he had a collision with a slave driving another donkey carrying stones. In his aggrieved petition to the regional official he claims that he is confined to bed by a life-threatening injury to his right shin, but it emerges that the real issue was that he had seized the other donkey involved and was refusing to return it to its owner.

Family life and death in Roman Egypt

Pompeius had at least three children, a son whom in A.D. 48 he apprenticed to an Alexandrian-style seated weaver (horizontal loom), and two daughters. One daughter, Herennia, married a man called Alexander (the name suggests gymnasial status), and moved to the nearby Arsinoite region (modern Fayyum). She had two sons, Pompeius and Syrian, named after their grandfather and great-grandfather. The women in Pompeius' life kept in touch through letters. Two from Herennia to Pompeius survive.

First, undated (the square brackets and dots represent gaps in the surviving text):

*Herennia to Pompeius her [father]
many greetings and continual good*

health, and best wishes to my mother. I beg you to remind my father to buy me an elegant coloured tunic. . . Don't forget to buy [another like?] the coloured one for Pration. Receive two measures of lentils from Thaisous. And Antiphanes wrote to me that if . . . I ask you to send me three staters' worth of green cloth for headbands. Little Pompeius sends you his regards, his father and his mother. Don't forget us. We send our regards to your children and all in the house. (2nd hand) Farewell.

Second, on 18 January A.D. 58:

Herennia to Pompeius her father, many greetings and continual health. I have bought the olives for you. They are asking from everywhere for pious offerings for the shrine of Souchos, from Romans and Alexandrians and the 'settlers' (gymnasial group) in the Arsinoite. They are asking Pompeius. I haven't given anything; indeed today I was expecting that he would come. Either you take care to persuade him; if not, we will give [it?]. And I received safely the letter by hand of (?) Onomastos (?). We pray that you are well. So that you don't forget your children, receive another letter from your son Syron. (Blank space of 3 lines.) We send regards to you and Charitous and her children. And little Pompeius sends you his regards. (Date.)

Herennia could sign 'Farewell' in her own hand, and probably could read Greek. But she used scribes to write her letters, which is why references to Pompeius sometimes say 'him' instead of 'you'. The young Syron was learning to write, although he failed to use the space deliberately left in the second letter for him to show off his skills to his grandfather. Souchos was the Greek name for the Egyptian crocodile god Sobek, who was the patron deity of the Arsinoite region. The letter suggests that Sobek's priests did not normally expect offerings from Greeks and Romans, including Egyptians who had become Hellenized or Romanized like Pompeius. However, beliefs and behaviour seem to have been a complex mixture at all social levels, as the final letter of 15 October A.D. 64 illustrates:

Thaubas to Pompeius her father [[many]] greetings. You would do well, on receipt of my letter, to come immediately on account of the death of your unfortunate daughter Herennia after coming safely through a premature birth on (6 October). She gave birth to an eight-month boy, dead, and lived on for four days, and after that died,

and was properly wrapped for funeral by us and her husband, and was placed at Alabanthis so that, if you come and wish to, you can see her. Best wishes from Alexander and the children. Farewell.

Thaubas dictated 'many greetings', then had the 'many' crossed out. The 'eight-month' baby may not have been that premature; it was a Greek way of saying that a still birth had been no-one's fault. The 'Roman' Herennia was taken by her Hellenized husband Alexander to a mortuary centre for desiccation (drying out the corpse) prior to mummification, where Pompeius could see the body. Funerary practices change along with other cultural and social changes. The new regional elites of early Roman Egypt found new ways to show off their wealth and status. Some went for bling, and had their mummies gilded lavishly, and sometimes encrusted with costume jewellery. Some gilded mummies are known from the Arsinoite region, but here they now began a more novel practice of inserting Roman-style veristic (individual, not stylized) portraits into mummies, the so-called 'Fayyum portraits'. Perhaps Herennia was one of the first of this new multicultural trend.

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For some of these and many other translated texts from Roman Egypt, with helpful explanation of the background, see: J. L. Rowlandson (ed.), *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt. A Sourcebook* (1998). A good introduction to the 'Fayyum' portraits is S. Walker and M. Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces. Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (1997).